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ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests that there may be systematic differences in instruction and learning associated with particular social studies subjects. The researchers question whether social studies instruction differs across the various subjects that constitute the social studies curriculum. If so, to what extent do these differences have educationally significant consequences? Social studies curriculum planning involves, whether consciously or not, a classification of subjects. The examination of social studies courses suggests that boundaries vary, between these subjects, from strong to weak, with the weaker boundaries in the middle and elementary-school grades. There is some evidence that teachers' conceptions of a particular subject affects how they interpret the goals of the curriculum and which instructional strategies they employ. A review of the research literature found that the choices of curricular organization and instructional strategy influence what is learned, how it is learned, and what counts as evaluation. I. L. Beck and M. G. McKeown (1989) concluded that the social studies curriculum has been too global and vague to allow a meaningful understanding of instructional practices. A 33-item bibliography is appended. (NL)

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How Does Instruction Vary Across Social Studies Subjects?*

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Consider the following descriptions of segments of two social studies lessons. In the first segment, the teacher asks her students why they did not know much about buying in grocery stores even though they often visited them. Students' responses included:

> "Stores are fun: they have lots of things, and kids look around while Mommies buy."
>
> "Sometimes Mommies and Daddies don't like us around while they decide."
>
> "They won't let you go behind the swinging doors [stock room]."
>
> "We have talked to a store man about whether we have got enough money for a present or something, but we have never talked to him about being a store man."
>
> "Even though my Mommy works in a store, she doesn't talk about it much at home."
>
> (Clements, Fielder & Tabachnick, 1966, p. 159)

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The second extract concerns the nullification crisis between South Carolina and President Jackson:

> Sensing that the impact of the tariff was reasonably well understood, the teacher then asked students to examine the "Address to People of the United States" and to pick out the main arguments for nullification. One student summarized the main point that since the states had the power to form the Constitution, they also enjoyed the authority to nullify any actions of the Federal government not specifically delegated to it. Another student noted the point that the states' ratification of the Constitution included a special obligation to protect it from usurpation of power by the Federal government. The teacher pressed students to find further arguments, and they did: the claim that the Federal government may tax only to raise revenue, but not to protect some internal interests to the detriment of others; and the argument that Jackson's threat to use force on this issue would supercede the law. In each instance, the teacher focused on wording in the text and asked students to give their own understanding of the argument (Newmann, in press).

As is no doubt apparent, the first lesson segment is from the primary grades and the second from high school. Both are social studies lessons. Although both lessons touch on economic issues and both appear to involve

higher-order thinking on the part of students, their subject matters (and grade levels) are very different. Of course, various factors contribute to the differences between these two lesson segments. I shall focus on just one factor: Are there educationally-significant differences in instruction across the various subjects that constitute the social studies curriculum?

The Research Base on Social Studies Instruction

In the last 15 years, there has been a considerable expansion of knowledge about life in social studies classrooms (e.g., Cornett, 1987; Cuban, in press; Duggan, Grossman, & Thorpe, 1986; Goodlad, 1984; Hyland, 1985; McNeil, 1986; Newmann, in press; Stake & Easley, 1978; Thornton, 1988; Thornton & Wenger, 1990; White, 1985; Wineburg & Wilson, in press). Increasingly, too, researchers have heeded Lee S. Shulman's (1986) advice to examine "the substance of classroom life, the specific curriculum content and subject matter being studied" (p. 22). In sum, there has been a growing recognition among researchers that understanding social studies curriculum and instruction entails looking behind the classroom door.

Although some researchers have constructed fine-grained analyses of instruction with particular attention to the subject matter, few researchers have compared social studies instruction across subjects. Despite the wishes of some social studies educators that social studies be conceived as a unified curriculum area (e.g., Longstreet, 1985; McCutchen, 1963), in practice, social studies programs are, especially in the middle and secondary grades, usually administrative shorthand for a loose confederation of subjects such as history, geography, economics, and anthropology (Lengel & Superka, 1982). Nonetheless, researchers of social studies education have often not paid much heed to instructional differences resulting from different subject origins.

Tacitly, it has been assumed that grocery stores and the nullification crisis are of a piece.

Recently, however, a handful of researchers have suggested that there may be systematic differences in instruction and learning associated with particular social studies subjects. In the remainder of this paper, I shall review the--admittedly slim--research base on subject specificity in social studies instruction. More particularly, I shall raise two questions: First, to what extent is social studies instruction different across subjects? And, second, if there are systematic differences, to what extent do these differences have educationally-significant consequences?

What is Subject Specificity?

When developers or administrators or classroom teachers engage in social studies curriculum planning, they inevitably, whether consciously or not, deal with what Basil Bernstein (1971) called "classification" of subjects: the relationships between subjects. Bernstein noted that these relationships could be either strong (where contents are well-insulated from each other by strong "boundaries") or weak (where the "boundaries" between subjects are blurred).

Examination of social studies courses across the K-12 range suggests that boundaries vary from strong to weak. On the one hand, the boundaries between most high school courses are strong. The connections between U.S. history and economics, for instance, are unlikely to be made explicit for students (Atkin, Kennedy, & Patrick, 1989). The Problems of Democracy course may be an exception to this rule, but the available empirical evidence here is slim (see Cornett, 1987).

On the other hand, boundaries seem to be weaker in the middle- and elementary-school grades. A sixth-grade curriculum on the Western hemisphere or a third-grade curriculum on communities appear to be less subject-specific. Nonetheless, these weak boundaries may not be as weak as they appear at first glance. As three authorities in social studies education once observed:

> Typically, one or a few of the social sciences is expected to make the major contribution at any particular time, while the other social sciences are given only minor emphasis. For example, material from sociology and economics is widely used in studies of family, school, and neighborhood in primary grades. The major emphasis tends to become historical and geographical in the middle grades, but it may lean heavily on anthropology in the study of cultures outside the United States (Clements, Fielder, & Tabachnik, 1966, p. 6).

Throughout the K-12 social studies curriculum, then, subject specificity appears to have some influence on the curriculum. At both the elementary level (e.g., Thornton & Wenger, 1990) and the secondary level (e.g., Wilson & Wineburg, 1988), there is some evidence that teachers' conceptions of what a particular subject <u>is</u> affect how they interpret the goals of the curriculum, how they use curriculum materials, which instructional strategies they employ, and what they legitimate via evaluation.

For the purposes of this paper, I will define subject specificity as: the degree to which curriculum and instruction are influenced by the dominant subject (e.g., history, anthropology) constituting a social studies course.

What Degree of Subject Specificity Exists?

As I have already mentioned, a few scholars have recently conducted empirical studies that shed some light on subject specificity. Although this research base is small, examination of these studies indicates that there are subject specific differences in materials, curricular organization, and instruction. Researchers have had little to say, however, about what these findings might mean for improvements in materials, curricular organization and instruction.

In a series of papers (Beck & McKeown, 1988; Beck, McKeown, & Gromoll, 1989; Beck & McKeown, in press), Isabel L. Beck and Margaret G. McKeown have examined elementary-level social studies textbooks. Among other issues, Beck and McKeown have been concerned with the qualities of explanations provided in textbooks.

Of interest here is that textual organization appears to vary from the primarily geographic content of fourth-graders' study of world regions to the primarily historical content of fifth-graders' study of the United States. For example, Beck and McKeown (1989) point out how texts must provide a "framework" that exposes relationships between factors such as climate and commerce in order to understand a particular type of region such as a desert. Although text authors do not always provide this type of framework, it appears to be essential if students are to find the content meaningful and memorable.

In a contrasting example, Beck and McKeown (1989) note that history is "narrative in nature"; the learner's appreciation of causal chains of events, thus, takes on a more central role than in geography. Although meaningful accounts in textbooks are clearly desirable goals for both history and geography, it appears that textbooks should be structured somewhat differently

in geography and history if these goals are to be realized. And, given that many social studies lessons are structured according to criteria drawn from the textbook's organization, it would seem to follow that different subjects' organizations would result in different instructional arrangements.

Beck and McKeown do not directly address the likely instructional differences resulting from subject specificity; Susan S. Stodolsky's (1988) work on elementary-level instructional arrangements in social studies does. In a study of 19 fifth-grade social studies classrooms in the Chicago metropolitan area, Stodolsky (1988) concluded that "there seems to be a connection between disciplinary origins of topics, cognitive goals, and classroom activities" (p. 115). History, and to some extent geography, Stodolsky found, were "more structured or ordered" than content from the social sciences, and instruction in history and geography were more frequently teacher-dominated. In contrast, small group problem-solving and higher mental processes figured more prominently in classes where anthropology, psychology, and sociology were being taught. Teachers tended to regard history and geography "as collections of facts to be taught" (p. 116). Perhaps most interesting of all, Stodolsky found "a highly regular linear pattern between increasing cognitive complexity and increases in the level of student involvement" (p. 134). Higher-order thinking was much more evident with content drawn from the social sciences; lower-order thinking was more characteristic of history and geography. There is at least some evidence of the same pattern at the secondary level (Ladwig, 1990; Newmann, 1990).

Discussion

Let me begin this section by saying that no subject dictates particular instructional strategies or form of curricular organization. Nor does any

subject hold a monopoly on potential for higher-order thinking. The flip side of the coin is also true: "the mere presence or absence of an instructional strategy is not sufficient to establish what type of academic work may be occurring in a classroom" (White, 1985, p. 248; see also White, 1989).

Nevertheless, there appears to be a better-than-even chance that particular forms of curricular organization and types of instructional strategies--and, hence, learning (Eisner, 1982, p. 75; Popkewitz, 1978, pp. 41-42; Walker & Schaffarzick, 1974)--are more commonly associated with some social studies subjects than others. Some of this variation may, of course, be associated with the domain specificity of some concepts (see Shulman, 1990) such as time (Mathews, 1926; Thornton & Vukelich, 1988) and space (Downs & Liben, 1988). The significance of domain specificity for social studies learning, however, remains poorly understood.

What is clear is that choices of curricular organization and instructional strategy influence what is learned, how it is learned, and what counts as evaluation. Although I cannot presently definitively state what difference subject specificity makes, it would appear to warrant closer scrutiny. As Beck & McKeown (1989) concluded, current descriptions of the social studies curriculum have been far too global and vague to permit a meaningful understanding of instructional practices. Grocery stores and the nullification crisis may not be of a piece.

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